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ABSTRACT

The question of whether human resource development (HRD) should assume a leadership role in social responsibility has not been seriously or rigorously addressed in the HRD literature. As a multidisciplinary field, HRD is influenced not only by societal needs but also by underlying disciplines, including economics, psychology, general systems, ethics, and sociology. Both as an organizational function and as a stand-alone profession, HRD plays a principal role in enhancing organizations' long-term sustainability and has the potential to help cultivate organizations and people that positively influence communities, society, and the environment. The influence that economic and psychological theory have had on HRD and the world views that have influenced HRD require review and redefinition so that HRD professionals can clarify and improve their understanding of their potential contributions and responsibility to society. In the long run, those HRD professionals and academics who respond to the challenge of social responsibility will prove most successful not because it is the right thing to do but because organizations that add value to external clients and society will likely add value to themselves and their shareholders. As a profession, HRD has a collective conscience that provides the catalyst for leadership in social responsibility. (Contains 37 references.) (MN)

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Social Responsibility of Human Resource Development: How Our Definitions and Worldviews Impact Our Leadership Role

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Whether or not HRD should assume a leadership role in social responsibility has not been seriously or rigorously addressed in related literature or in professional dialogue. Examining the issue of social responsibility and HRD as a profession and occupation demands that we examine the assumptions underlying our fields' particular use of the disciplines of economics and psychology and to explore more socially responsible alternatives. In addition, this dialogue includes a critical and unorthodox look at how we define our field, how we define social responsibility, and how we view the world.

Keywords: Social Responsibility, Professional Responsibility,Professional Ethics

A profession is differentiated from a collection of skills or an occupation by certain shared characteristics. These characteristics include extensive intellectual knowledge and the provision of products and/or "services which are important to the organized functioning of society" (Callahan, 1988, p. 26). Human resource development has recognized, albeit unendorsed, collections of competencies that identify extensive intellectual knowledge. What the discipline of HRD has yet to acknowledge and resolve is its fundamental responsibility to society.

The way we view reality colors the way we see and understand the field of HRD and the breadth and depth of our leadership in social responsibility. Discussions are needed to critically assess certain taken-for-granted worldviews in which HRD is embedded, and thereby enhance the likelihood that as a profession we will act consciously on issues of social responsibility. Although as a multidisciplinary field, HRD draws on many disciplines, economics and psychology have been particularly influential. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine the assumptions underlying our field's particular use of the disciplines of economics and psychology and to explore more socially responsible alternatives.

Defining Social Responsibility

Being socially responsible as HRD professionals has two possible meanings. The first, a rational economic one, says that we have no moral responsibility beyond helping our own organization increase profits. Because rational economics is presumed to be morally neutral and human beings to be either amoral or immoral without outside control, morality is enforced through laws, contracts, and rules. The second meaning says that we do have a moral responsibility to address the needs and problems of the larger communities as well as those of our own organization. Morality issues from an understanding of the interconnectedness of all entities in the world and beyond. The first meaning, a rational economic one, implies that organizations are bounded entities dedicated to increasing profits through interactions with other bounded entities in society. The second is more fluid and suggests that the realities we construct and the boundaries we set are artificial, and we cannot profit if others do not profit, as well.

To be socially responsible within the rational economic worldview requires that we either justify what appears to be a moral action taken beyond the bounds of our own organization as "good for business," or take the radical step of going beyond the walls of our organizations to include stakeholders with no direct link to what we do. The first is reflected in the tax deductions allowed both organizations and individuals for philanthropic contributions and the current appearance of philanthropic foundations sponsored by high technology companies such as Microsoft and Dell in order to improve their corporate image. Similarly, we regularly see advertisements by oil and tobacco companies showing us how the "care" for either the environment or our children. One way HRD professionals have acted with concern for the bottom line and in a socially responsible manner has been to contribute to education improvement and recruitment of diverse groups. However, many of the community issues that require attention are

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not directly linked to a company's bottom line. Devoting time and resources to them as HRD professionals within an organization cannot be justified in terms of rational economics. For example, companies have been little concerned with the Earth's atmosphere, and little rational justification related to the bottom line exists for HRD professionals to address that issue. We have little wonder that social responsibility for organizations and HRD professionals currently seems to be either calculated or cynical or a fringe preoccupation.

The second meaning of social responsibility suggests that a profession such as HRD does have a responsibility to communities beyond its employing organization's boundaries. It implies that organizations and professional groups are social institutions and have a social contract with society. Social responsibility under this precept suggests that HRD has "a moral obligation to use their resources for the common good as well as obligations to particular groups such as stakeholders, consumers, employers, clients, and creditors" (Tomer, 1994, p. 128). In this worldview, we construct reality with each action we take, all living and non-living entities are interconnected and interdependent, rationality is holistic and nonlinear, and each of us (like organizations and communities) are defined by our relationships. Morality issues from recognition of our fundamental interdependence.

Defining HRD in economic and psychological terms

As a multidisciplinary field, HRD is influenced not only by societal needs, but also by several underlying disciplines; namely, economics, psychology, general systems, ethics, and sociology, among others. Arguably, most of the organizations in which HRD professionals work are economically-driven, meaning that HRD itself is infused with the economic/capitalist ethos of what Peter Drucker calls a post-capitalist society (Drucker, 1993). Historically, the discipline of psychology has been capitalism's handmaiden in developing ever-better ways to adapt employees to this economic/capitalist worldview.

Economics

Even with the ubiquitous nature of economics, HRD researchers and practitioners have not embraced it as a basis for research and practice in ways that would benefit organizations and the HRD field (Passmore, 1997). Few scholars or practitioners, if any, have made any attempt to study the relationship between economic theory and HRD research and practice or to apply economic theory to research and practice. The taken-for-granted economic belief system of HRD professionals is that the purpose of HRD interventions is to provide financial benefit to the organization, people are economic capital, and organizations are economic entities (Swanson, 1999). This economic ideology is consistent with *neoclassical* economics or free-market capitalism.

Neoclassical economics explains the free-market capitalist system and suggests that "starting from zero consumption, people will strive to consume goods and services without limit (Burk, 1994, p. 315). However, in a finite system there are always limits. Scarce resource economic theory implies that "decision makers choose between options based on their forecasted return on investment (Swanson, 1999, p. 13). The problem is that most decision makers in organizations today do not understand or acknowledge that organizations are "not only engines of economic growth but also pivotal agents of social and political integration" (Tichy, McGill & St. Clair, 1997, p. 28). Thus, decisions are made using myopic economic models that wreak havoc on the environment and have been linked to violence in the workplace. The brilliant economist E.F. Schumacher said that the modern economic system was a "path to resource depletion, environmental degradation, worker alienation, and violence (Schumacher, 1979).

The current discontent with privileging economics over human and social issues is exposing the weaknesses of neoclassical economic theory as well as limitations of a rational scientific worldview. Both the ideology of capitalism and the culture of consumerism need to be fundamentally reassessed (Welford, 1995; Hatcher, 1999). Based on exploitation of valuable and non-renewable resources and characterized by individualism rather than collectivism orthodox, short-term and linear economic models fall short when addressing systemic societal and global environmental dilemmas. "Long-term results cannot be achieved by piling short-term results on short-term results (Drucker, 1993, p.80).

Traditional capitalist economies are mechanistic, static, and atomistic and view technical growth as the way to make our resources endlessly sustainable. The ability of the environment to continue to support life is increasingly undermined by the same neoclassical economic approaches subscribed to (consciously or unconsciously) by most HRD professionals. The obstacles preventing sustainability, i.e., depletion of natural resources, increasing population, workplace violence, and environmental degradation, show little sign of diminishing. The awareness of the planetary life support system's deterioration is forcing the realization that decisions made on the basis of short-term economic criteria can have far-reaching and disastrous results. The

challenge is to strengthen the interdependence between economic development and environmental and social sustainability by creating a profession that actively addresses the obstacles preventing sustainability. HRD has the opportunity to become such a profession.

Psychology

The field of psychology has provided the basis for much of the HRD field. Behavioral psychology spawned competency based training and behavioral and performance objectives, psychologist Kurt Lewin's input/output model of organizational change and psychoanalytic and Gestalt theories dominated organizational development, and developmental psychology provided a foundation for career development.

However, psychology itself does not provide a sparkling model of social responsibility. It has a history of strong commitment to the tenets of scientific rationalism and is only now reassessing the serious limitations of its historical alliances, alliances that were themselves established in order to gain legitimacy as a scientific field and secure prestige and funding for research. The result of selling itself to the highest bidder has meant that the field has used its skills to further the interests of society's dominant groups and often failed to act on behalf of those who are oppressed. Clinical psychology pathologized those who fail to conform. Organizational psychology medicalized dysfunctional organizations and learning psychology problematized recalcitrant learners. Developmental psychology took male Harvard undergraduates as the norm and categorized those who were different as less developed.

Much of this history has been blindly incorporated into HRD practice in the name of increased efficiency, management development, job skill inventories, competency-based training, career ladders, motivational tools, performance appraisals, organizational diagnosis, and even team-building and some kinds of action research. In fact, even when we step outside our organizations and look back, we still focus on our own well-being and ask questions such as "Is revenue up or down, how are products/services being improved, and how do customers feel about the company" (Weisbord, 1987, p. 7).

Emerging psychological theory begins to erase the boundaries between the social science disciplines. It emphasizes the inseparable nature of individual and society (Bruner, 1996; Gergen, 1994), the ways in which we use narrative to construct our realities (Bruner, 1985), the ways in which we define ourselves by our relationships (Mitchell, 1988), the co-construction of ourselves and our understandings of reality (Gergen, 1994; Brooks & Edwards, 1997), and the increasingly complex cognitive demands our environment places on us (Kegan, 1994). All of these theories support an increasingly systemic view of our world and us. They ask that we take responsibility for the world beyond our organization, and recognize that with each interaction we have and each action we take, we are co-constructing a new organization. They require us to take a perspective and develop the ability to enact our professional skills in a way that is non-linear and non-reductionistic. Does competency-based training develop people who can understand their interdependence with others? Does diagnosing organizations encourage us to focus on our interrelatedness with our environment or the project of self-perfection? Does a career ladder allow us to think about employment as a social issue or as job posting and succession planning within our organization? With a new understanding of interrelatedness and existential choice, psychology has engaged the possibility of diminishing the isolation of individuals within Western society and establishing a basis for responsible social action.

With psychology's leap forward, HRD can interact with a discipline that provides theoretical clarity for carrying out an everyday practice that is socially responsible. HRD not only can, but also should lead organizations to an ever-deeper understanding that social responsibility is no longer a financial burden, but a necessity for survival.

Impact of Worldviews on HRD

Taking for granted the rational scientific assumptions of rational economics and a traditional psychology has made the lens through which HRD sees both reductionistic and predictable in a variable and limitless world. The importance of viewing HRD diverse worldviews including logical positivism, critical theory, hermeneutics, and systems thinking or deep ecology, for example (Capra, 1996), requires further discussion. The discussion of at least two of these worldviews, logical positivism and systems theory, should help justify HRD's role as a leader in social responsibility.

Logical Positivism

Logical positivism is a philosophy with an "extremely positive evaluation of scientific methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a worldview for a profession such as HRD, it limits our approach to individuals, organizations, and even societies to one of control, efficiency, rule-based predictability, two-dimensional thinking, anthropocentric-orientation, and cause-effect relationships. Capra (1996) writes that logical positivism is an "outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally connected world"(p.4). Although positivism is arguably the dominant worldview of business and industry today, Lincoln & Guba (1985) describe it as a worldview that is "passe… and is the product of small, confused minds who retreat to it because they lack any other viable alternatives" (p. 24).

Positivism has two consequences: determinism and reductionism. Both are negative to professions like HRD and unfounded as a viable way of seeing today's world. Determinism negates human free will to change social mores and networks or establish new social interconnections. Reductionism makes all phenomena, including social responsibility, subject to a single set of laws (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Logical positivism has an important impact on HRD's role in social responsibility. First, when we choose to view our reality as deterministic, we negate our ability to regenerate and legitimate our profession and our society. When we believe that there is a single tangible reality that can be reduced to a series of parts to be studied independently, and that the whole is simply the sum of those parts, we are unable to grasp the utter simplicity that our profession is part of society. Similarly, when we are unable or unwilling to accept our part in the web of life, we are sentencing our profession to second-class status as the slave of a paternalistic and contemptuous economic/management system. A system that is dedicated to profit at any cost is blind to the disastrous affects that uncontrolled capitalism is having on our social and ecosystems and ultimately, the capitalist organization itself (Fox, 1994; Capra, 1996; Hatcher, 1999).

Systems Theories

Unlike logical positivism, a worldviews that HRD professionals may not be as familiar with, but that allow us to change our frame of reference (Kuhn, 1962) are *systems theories*. General systems theory, for example, is defined as "an important means of controlling and investigating the transfer of principles from one field to another" (Bertalanffy, 1968, p.84). Many systems theorists suggested that organizations and societies are complex, three dimensional, cosmological, open systems with interdependent subsystems working together to achieve the goal of the whole system (Capra, 1996; Wimbiscus, 1995). Yet, compared to rational economics, general systems theory is a relatively modest body of knowledge (Swanson, 1999).

Recent concerns with the relationship between organizations and environmental degradation have illuminated the relevance of related and contemporary systems theories such as *autopoiesis* or self-regulating systems (Maturana & Varela, 1980), *deep ecology* (Capra, 1996), and the *Gaia* hypothesis (Lovelock, 1979, 1988). We will discuss each systems theory briefly.

Autopoiesis, also known as self-regulating or self-producing systems, is concerned with two hypothesis: first, all living systems are organized in a closed circular process, and second, all living systems are cognitive systems, and living is a cognitive process (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Behavior in the physical domain is governed by physical laws while behavior in a social system is governed by norms and rules which can be broken (Capra, 1996). Luhmann (1990) developed the concept of social autopoiesis as a process or network of communication. Since social systems are language-bound, i.e., symbolic, they are self-produced by non-physical boundaries of expectations, loyalty, confidentiality, and so on (Capra, 1996). This system's worldview implies that organizations and societies are living systems and as part of the physical world are self-regulating and thus capable of continual change while preserving a pattern of organization.

Capra's concept of *deep ecology* is a broad-based, holistic worldview: a way of seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a detached collection of parts. "Deep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature" (Capra, 1996, p.6). Thus, humans, communities, organizations, and societies are simply strands in a "web of life" (Capra, 1996, p.7).

Perhaps the most comprehensive and enchanted example of systems theory is *Gaia*, the notion that the planet Earth is a living system. Gaia is an ancient and organic, *Mother-Earth* metaphor, "drawn from the process of life"; mechanistic thinking depends on metaphors drawn from man-made machines (Sheldrake, 1991, p.13). Gaia as a mother earth metaphor is evidenced in cultures worldwide. Mother Earth was accepted as a sacred belief until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century when humanity's fear of wild, untamed nature reinforced its desire to

subdue Mother Nature. A world view where nature was no longer acknowledged as Mother or sacred, and no longer considered alive, finally evolved out of the desacralized scientific and industrial revolutions. Shifting focus from ecosystems to the planet as a whole, Gaia is a system of three layers (metaphorically): (a) Earth's biosphere, a thin layer of living things; (b) the inanimate Earth itself, and (c) a protective layer of atmosphere surrounding the biosphere. Gaia is considered autopoietic, i.e., it is self-bounded, self-generating, and self-perpetuating (Capra, 1996).

Systems theories have evolved from a mechanistic general systems theory to the organismic philosophy of Gaia. Mechanistic science rejects the idea that Gaia is alive, yet "morphogenesis, instinctive behavior, learning, and memory are still among the unsolved problems of biology, and the nature of life itself remains an open question" (Sheldrake, 1991, p.157). Unlike scientific systems thinking, Gaia reflects the fact that humankind's actions cannot be separated from the Earth, and like the Great Mother of ancient mythology, that Earth has a reciprocal aspect that cannot be ignored.

Our worldviews must begin to reflect contemporary needs for explanations that are applied, holistic, social, and ecologically benevolent. Wheatley (1994) suggested that "if nature uses certain principles to create her infinite diversity, it is highly probable that those principles apply to human organizations" (p. 143). Modifying theories and our worldviews without concurrent shifts in practice seals the fate of HRD as a second-rate discipline and most certainly obscures its role in enhancing corporate social responsibility. Continuously reviewing, revising, and utilizing economic and psychological theories and diverse worldviews that affect the ability of HRD to play a decisive role in building a sustainable future is both judicious and moral. Human resource development as a field of study and a profession should always reflect only those theories and worldviews that can truly enhance its ability to create a better world for individuals, organizations, and society.

Summary and Conclusions

Organizations significantly and continually influence humanity and acquire dominance over ecosystems. The way organizations view their contributions to society and the planet must be fundamentally changed to cultivate a chance for a sustainable future. "Organizations have to take social responsibility. There is no one else around in the society of organizations to take care of society itself. Yet they must do so responsibly, within the limits of their competence, and without endangering their performance capacity" (Drucker, 1993, p.97).

Human resource development as an organizational function and as a stand-alone profession plays a principle role in enhancing the long-term sustainability of organizations and has the potential to help cultivate organizations and people that positively influence communities, society, and the environment. The influence that economic and psychological theory have had on HRD and the worldviews that have influenced HRD require review and re-definition so that we might clarify and better understand our potential contributions and responsibility to society.

Today, society must be served through organizations. As organizations become more influential they become either instruments of destruction of the environment and society or tools for sustainability of communities, the ecology, and humanity. As an integral part of today's organizations, human resource development has an economic responsibility to the organizations who employ its professionals and methods and the HRD profession has a moral responsibility to individuals, organizations, and societies it influences. But, as discussed herein, HRD also has a responsibility to create a profession that is responsible beyond shortsighted economic gain. Rational economic and traditional psychological theory and obsolete worldviews are faithful to short-term returns and disjointed approaches to sustained change. Such theories hamper socially responsive organizational and societal changes. "There could be no greater folly than to manage the economy as though its sole relationship to earth is that of exploiter – as though the earth could be viewed as a fund of resources and a dumping ground for that which no longer serves us" (Harman & Porter, 1997, p133).

Shifts in the way we view our world (reality) are catalysts for progress toward sustainable development of the environment and humanity. Applied disciplines such as HRD must systematically review its assumptions about the world to ensure their validity and worth.

Human resource development professionals and academics who respond to the challenge of social responsibility will prove in the long run most successful not because it is simply the right thing to do but because "..... if we take care of the societal bottom line, the conventional bottom line will probably take care of itself. When an organization adds value to external clients and society, it will also likely add value to itself and its shareholders" (Kaufman, 1997, p. 3). Finally and ultimately, not to do so guarantees the eventual destruction of the Earth.

One final thought on the HRD profession assuming a leadership role in social responsibility. As implied earlier in this paper, some HRD professionals believe that just because we ought to do something does not mean we can do it. We must logically be able to perform an action. We all want to rid our society of poverty and crime and heal the environment, but given limited resources and abilities, we are not obligated to perform actions beyond our physical or mental abilities. Thus, we choose to delegate our responsibility to a "third party" such as the government or social institutions. This is a logical positivistic argument that results in limited and obviously questionable outcomes. It also assumes that we have no social responsibility because we are not morally culpable and social problems are not moral problems. There are several inconsistencies with this approach to social responsibility.

First, in the case of moral responsibility, "no delegation occurs because no person is excluded from the relationship" (French, 1988, p. 266). Using systems thinking previously discussed we are morally responsible because we are moral entities and are interconnected. The next inconsistency is that the act of delegation implies intention to be responsible. As collections of individuals with particular physical and mental properties, professions can be morally and thus socially responsible. This ascribes a certain level of singular intent that many would not ascribe to collective entities. However, we believe that, as a profession we have a collective conscience that manifests itself within the skills, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, culture, experiences, and spirit of the individuals who collectively make up the profession of human resource development. This conscience provides the catalyst for leadership in social responsibility.

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